



Republican Policy Committee

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March 18, 1996

Clinton's "About-Face" War on Drugs

Part I

"Moving full circle in this election year, President Clinton plans an ambitious upgrading of the White House drug control policy office three years after virtually wiping out that office."

[Washington Post, March 6, 1996]

Although Candidate Clinton sounded the "all out" drug war charge, he fell far short of actually leading the troops into full-scale battle. In fact, despite his intrepid sound bites, his first action on drugs as President was to cut the White House Office of Drug Control Policy staff by more than 80 percent and funding by more than 90 percent [Budget, FY 1994, p. A-222].

Meanwhile, according to a report prepared by the Senate Judiciary Committee earlier this year, the nation has experienced trends in illicit drug use that warrant much concern. [For more details, see Part II of this paper, which details statistical information contained in a report issued by the Senate Judiciary Committee in January.]

Youthful drug use is up sharply:

- A recent HHS survey showed that marijuana use had increased by an average of 50 percent among young people.

Hard-core drug use seems to be on the rise as well:

- Cocaine-related emergency room episodes hit their highest level in history in 1994 and marijuana-related emergency room episodes jumped 39 percent.

The availability of drugs is up:

- The data show that cheaper and purer drugs are getting through to American streets in greater quantities than ever before.

Now, with less than nine months left in his term of office, President Clinton vows to rededicate himself to the war on drugs. According to a White House supplemental request submitted on March 5, 1996, the Administration is now seeking staffing for 150 slots and requesting \$3.4 million in supplemental spending for the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Clinton's Forward March to Defeat

After nearly a year in office, Clinton finally appointed his Drug Czar, Lee Brown. However, Mr. Brown was not greeted with the support one would expect from a President dedicated to an "all out" war against drugs.

Reminding America that drug abuse is "as serious a problem as we have in America," Clinton greeted his cabinet-level drug czar with a decimated budget and radically reduced staff. According to Clinton's budget proposal, the Office of Drug Control Policy was to see its staff cut from 146 employees to only 25 — an 83 percent reduction, by far the biggest slash to any office. Further, the drug czar's budget was to be cut from \$185.8 million to a paltry \$5.8 million.

Here's how drug-control policy was handled at the White House, according to Byron York, writing for the *American Spectator* [February 1994]:

"One former drug office staffer describes how the choice was made: Leon Panetta gets appointed (at OMB). A savvy guy. Mickey Kantor (at USTR). A Friend of Bill. They're talking about a staff reduction. And there was nobody there to represent the drug office. Panetta's OMB was exempted from cuts, Kantor's office untouched. But in February [1993] the drug office was cut from 146 employees to 25, less than half the size of the White House communications staff. I stayed until they announced they would cut it to twenty-five,' says John Walters, who was acting director at the time and had been at the drug office since the beginning. 'At that point it was just a charade.'

"Walters's departure left virtually nobody in charge. February, March, and most of April passed; still no drug czar. Unfinished business, like the agency's budget, piled up. In late April, with no czar in place, the administration sent Alice Rivlin, deputy director of OMB, to congressional budget hearings. Rivlin confessed she did not know a lot about the drug issue. But she said the staff cut, despite most assumptions, was an indication that the drug issue had actually risen on the presidential agenda under Clinton. 'It is not that drug policy is less important,' she said. 'On the contrary it is more important . . . The problem has been a lack of leadership, not the size of the staff. A strong drug czar,' Rivlin said, 'would be the most important player in the Clinton war on drugs'."

Fortunately however, during the budget proceedings Congress forced the White House to do more on the drug war. Members rejected Clinton's 83-percent staff cut and timid funding request requiring instead a minimum of 40 staffers and a budget of \$11.7 million.

However, at nearly the same time, the Office of Personnel and Management signed off on a plan to add 12 new Senior Executive Service (SES) positions (with salaries beginning just under \$100,000) to the Drug Czar Office. With only 40 employees, every third staffer in the Drug Czar office was to be making at least \$100,000 a year. In fact, during the Bush

Administration, the same office had 146 employees, including 10 SES staffers. Ironically, in 1991 (responding to a Bush Administration request) OPM refused a request for three additional SES employees because, it said, the ratio of SES to regular employees would have been too high.

Clinton's Campaign Conversion

According to a White House supplemental request submitted March 5, 1996, the Administration is now seeking staffing for a total of 150 slots, four more than its high point in the Bush Administration and 125 more than the low point request in the Clinton Administration.

With a previously appropriated staff of 40 persons, the White House has requested \$3.4 million in supplemental spending for the Office of National Drug Control Policy, enough to pay for 80 new staff additions. This would complement the recently approved request for 30 "detailees" from the Pentagon and \$250 million additional spending authorization from reprogrammed Pentagon funds ("detailees" are paid by their home agencies, so their cost is not reflected in the White House budget).

The President's recent "about face" is a welcomed return to the traditional war against drugs, despite its late election year arrival. However, in the words of William Raspberry writing in the March 11, 1996 *Washington Post*:

"The problem [in actually fighting the war against drugs] is the mind set of the man [President Clinton]. Maybe he is so convinced that the drug problem is beyond remedy that he's content to take credit for simply trying to address it."

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[For more details on the war against drugs, see *Losing Ground Against Drugs: A Report on Increasing Illicit Drug Use and National Drug Policy*, December 1995, issued by the Senate Judiciary Committee.]